Poppy People
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Isaiah 2:4: *"And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."*

To Poppy People

1

“Dad, you often see them walking together in the city, don’t you? Usually, there are three or four of them together. I must say they always look very smart.”

“You are named after their founder.”

“What do you mean?”

"Moina, your first name."

"Who was she?"

"She was the Poppy Lady: Moina Belle Michael. The woman who started the Poppy movement."

"Really."

"Yes, did your mother not tell you."

"No."

As they walked along Glasgow's famous Argyle Street, Moina looked at her father as if to say: "Are you pulling my leg?"

Up until this point, Moina had been daydreaming, not really listening to him. She knew he was not the type to be interested in others, especially people going by on the other side of the road.

In any case, Moina knew he was keen to get her to the high street store and buy his teenage daughter what she wanted. Then, of course, after that get back to the gym, meet his friends and go for a run. There was no doubt about it, these days

her dad was a real keep fit fanatic. This all came about after his knee operation. It was as if he had no time to lose now.

On the contrary, Moina was not in a hurry to go anywhere. She liked strolling through the city centre of Glasgow, looking at people. As she walked along with her father, Moina watched the Poppy People closely until they turned off towards George Square. Naturally, she wondered where they were going to.

Her dad, of course, sensed this and thought he had better tell her: "They have a ceremony today at 11am at the square. That group always do it the Thursday before Remembrance Sunday."

"Can we go?" she asked, as she looked appealingly at him.

"No, we need to get you to the department store to pick up your wedding outfit. You know what your mother said - you must look your best."

“What does he mean that I have been named after the woman called Moina Belle Michael?” wondered Moina: “Sounds interesting, though.”

As is the way with close relationships, as he held the department store door open for his teenage daughter, her father answered this hidden question: “The woman who had the idea to create the poppy emblem was called Moina. Your mother apparently read the book about her when she was pregnant with you. That is how you got your name.”

Moina walked inside the department store in town and, as they climbed the stairs up to the wedding shop, she was quite taken aback by this: “I didn’t know that. So, that is why I am called Moina.”

2

Ten years later at lunchtime outside the Mabel Hotel in the Merrylea area of Glasgow, wedding guests were starting to arrive. Some were chatting, others not, as they loitered around on the pavement outside the hotel.

They had gathered there no doubt waiting for someone to call them inside, tell them what to do and where to go. The

thing they all had in common was obvious: they all looked lost.

As she got out of the taxi, Moina could see this, and she avoided them. As she walked on she glanced over the Mabel Hotel hedge into the large garden area in front of the small carpark. Some guests she could see had escaped there to the beer garden. They seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Moina turned and smiled at her companion: "Naturally, they are just acclimatising themselves to the taste of alcohol before the main event. Ted since we are early, I think we should join them," she suggested.

"Good idea," replied Ted, "I see some empty seats there."

Yes, the thought of an early aperitif in the garden was very appealing indeed to both of them. Standing outside the hotel

on the pavement with the lost and lonely was certainly not for Moina.

It was good luck when they got there that they managed to get seated on that wooden bench Ted had spotted right in the middle of the beer garden.

The beer tent over to the left was quiet, no doubt it would be busy later. It was plain to see that is where everyone went to when it rained. And as all the guests here for this wedding knew it can certainly rain in Glasgow.

Quickly the table was cleared for them by an efficient young waitress. As she wiped it with the latest virus cleaning fluid, she smiled at both of them, trying to share in the excitement of the occasion.

Moina noticed when she sat down that the other wedding guests round about her were mainly from the local area too.

When the waitress finished cleaning the table, they finally ordered some drinks.

Moina refrained from alcohol, and so too did her companion Ted. He was quite annoyed about this; for he was driving later that day.

One of the reasons she had asked Ted, her old friend from high school, to accompany her to her cousin's wedding was that he knew the bride's sister. The other reason was that he was just about to leave Glasgow and take up a job in London. Moina knew she might not see him again for a while.

It was common knowledge that Ted had got himself a premier job as a journalist in the capital with some well-known international media company. This was something he had always been hankering after.

Moina knew that; for they had worked together, as temps, in the local newspaper the Mercury advertiser and gazette. That was the year they both left high school.

Presently, many more of her old school friends from the local area arrived and, as they came out into the beer garden, she smiled and spoke to some of them.

Fortunately, no one mentioned the fact to her that ten years ago, Moina had a great disappointment. It may have been the same month, November, but not the same day. The eleventh of November was the day that everything went wrong for her - she would never forget that combination.

That day she was set to marry Jack Montgomery, her childhood sweetheart. Unfortunately, he took ill just before the big day and passed away. He had been a soldier and had suffered after returning from a conflict in the east.

Few in life felt Moina's pain. Even at home at that time with her mum and dad, she felt it was only Patrick her faithful Labrador who seemed to acknowledge receipt of her broken spirit.

Moina from that tragic day hid her grief in a strange way. She did this by embracing life in others. Mercifully, it had worked well.

Today, Moina was happy to be a guest at her cousin Clare McNaugton's wedding. Everyone who came over to speak with her in the garden outside the Mabel Hotel could see that she was happy for her cousin Clare.

The chap Moina asked to accompany her to the wedding never mentioned the disappointment to her either. She guessed, like the rest of the family, Ted was proud of her for keeping a stiff upper lip and all that.

"Well, not everyone has got a job as a reporter for a well-known media company, have they?" she teased him, as they sat together.

Just like Ted, he made a joke of it all: "Yes, life is full of surprises. Today, I am at

a wedding on the south-side of Glasgow. Who would have thought it, at Clare McNaughton's wedding."

Ted was always outspoken though he gave little away about himself, or what he actually felt about others. However, Moina knew he was thinking about some of the people around her at the wedding, and she just smiled at him.

"Yes, I am looking forward to it," was his only comment about the great event.

Moina had never seen him in a suit before. She thought he looked rather odd. He was like a film extra in a television movie. Normally, he was quite easy-going and ready to engage on any subject, local, national, trivial or profound.

Today though Monia could see he was rather subdued. She knew weddings did that to some guests. After all, they were happy and sad occasions. Even if you did

not know the bride, or the groom, you could end up feeling that way.

Like all other weddings, most folks drank and ate too much. Some guests even became adrift from the proceedings, as if they wanted to be somewhere else. Ted was one of them.

Moina, on the other hand, had a curious mind and, although she was inclined to be reserved, the disappointment of her own wedding did not stop her enjoying herself. She danced and chatted with fellow guests. People who knew Moina were amazed; one woman even wondered how adventurous she was.

"What a change in Moina," said the mother-in-law of the bride, when she saw her dancing with the groom. "Is that not her whose betrothed died the day before her wedding? She seems so happy now."

3

Later on, when the bride and groom made their way around their guests, Moina took Ted back outside to the beer garden. She, like others, had heard laughter and shouts of joy from some of the guests out there, and wanted to see what was going on.

The Mabel Hotel was of a reasonable size. Due to the pandemic the large area of ground around it - that had once been a flower garden - had been reconstructed into an outdoor leisure area. The beer tent, popular with the locals during the summer, although quiet at the moment had not long been erected too.

Many businesses had not survived in this local area. It had been all right for a time after Lockdown, but when the furlough scheme ended a lot of shops, bars and restaurants, went to the wall.

When they stepped outside again, Moina spotted a drunk man over at the far end of the garden entertaining a table of guests.

This was obviously the reason for all the noise. She could see he was dancing about the way middle-aged drunk men do, singing some old pop song to himself.

When things got dull, he wiggled his behind to keep the laughter going.

In the direction of this comic fellow, by the hedge, directly in front of the main road, two men were sitting there. They were an odd couple. It was as if they did not fit in with the other guests. They had been chatting away quite the thing up until the younger of the two spotted the thin attractive figure of Moina walking towards them.

Moina saw him staring at her. The young lad looked familiar, but she recognised right away the man sitting next to him. His name was Roster; he was a solicitor. He lived on the other side of Glasgow. All the local crooks went to Roster when they were in trouble. She thought him a strange man.

Roster, whatever he was saying to his young friend beside him, stopped talking

when he saw Ted and Moina coming towards them.

Roster sitting there looked an ordinary fellow, thinning on top with a little black beard. He gave off the impression he was disinterested in what was going on around him. This bland persona gave him an image of a high school teacher just about to go off on a vacation, but there was a harsh side to him others could not see.

Moina spotted this when she first set eyes on him many years ago. She remembered him coming in to the Mercury newspaper office wishing to put an advertisement in for his company: Gate solicitors.

This was her first job. She had always been fascinated by him, even though she did not know or like him. This was odd to her. Moina could see through his legal facade. She thought Roster a masochist,

dominant like a priest who has two sides to him: gentle and severe.

His friend on the other hand was a jolly lad. He was drinking his pint of lager with relish that would have made Martin Luther happy.

Moina suddenly realised that the lad Roster was sitting beside stayed not far from the hotel where she worked, in the Merrylea area. They called him Dipper.

"No doubt one of Roster's clients," she told herself.

She had heard like everyone else in the local area that last year Dipper had broken into the bookmakers shop, just down the road from the hotel where she worked. Apparently, he not only got off with the takings, but got off with the charges too, due to lack of evidence.

Yes, the lad in question sitting there drinking his beer Moina knew to look at, but not his real name. He seemed a

harmless enough sort, not so his friend: Mr Roster.

"Oh, there is Michael over there," said Ted stating the obvious, before nodding towards him.

It was a surprise to Moina that they knew each other; for she remembered Roster only came into the Mercury office now and again, and he always enquired at the front counter. In these days, Ted worked upstairs in the editorial.

It was well-known in the area where she lived folks did not interact much with others on the other side of Glasgow, and that was even before the pandemic.

Presently, Moina was introduced to them by her companion Ted: "Roster this is Moina," he said drawing his hand towards her.

The lawyer smiled, as they both sat down on the opposite side across the

wooden bench from him. He obviously did not remember her.

Naturally, the solicitor introduced his friend too. He did this in a curious way, as if it was the name of a well-known bottle of beer. As he smiled, he ejaculated in an upbeat tone: "This is Brodie Macintyre, one of my clients."

Moina noticed Roster smile at the lad beside him, after saying this. His tender affection was no doubt well meant.

They were an odd couple indeed: Roster and Brodie. Even before the solicitor spoke again, she could see that he was not so much an alpha male, but a male predator. She had read about such men, but had never come across any before.

The reason all of this came together in her mind was the way he kept looking at boy Brodie beside him. It was as if he was

saying to him: “I am keeping an eye on you, my young friend.”

For whatever reason, the conversation at that moment fell silent. Moina did not really know where it was going anyway; for she was deep in her own thoughts.

Roster seemed uneasy when the silence came over them. He fidgeted with the beer mat and smiled to himself. Then as if to affirm that he was always on top of his game, the solicitor spoke openly, but to no one in particular: “The festivities are going well - that’s something, is it not?”

As he lifted up his bottle of coke, Ted replied: “Are you still in criminal law, Roster?”

“Yes, there is no end to it, I am afraid, Ted.”

“Anything interesting, at the moment?”

“No, just some young lads getting into trouble in the local area.”

As she sat there with Ted by the wooden table, Moina noticed once again the way Roster looked at boy Brodie beside him. She could tell he was his client, but was he his lover? She didn't think so, but she was not sure.

Moina chatted briefly about the bride, and then back it went to Roster's law career again. It came to light that Ted's father had used him once in a case against a neighbour.

"No more trouble from Mr Vance, after the defecating affair involving the cho wow?" asked Roster.

"No, as far as I know, everything is in good order," replied Ted. Obviously not wanting to go there, he quickly made a joke of it all: "I think all dog walkers avoid going past my old man's property these days, after the 'chow wow' affair, as you put it."

At this time in life it is fair to say the young, and not so young, all over Glasgow were eager to get back to socialising again.

Mercifully, the social scene in the city had opened up once more. This was after a long-protracted virus lockdown. However, many bars had gone bust after the furlough scheme had ended, and there was a feeling about that what had been before was no more.

For something to say, Moina picked on this topic, and mentioned a well-known haunt in town that was back up and running again, after being boarded up for the past two years: "I here Valentinos has opened again, and was quite busy last week."

"Valentinos that's interesting," said Roster: "I represented a client who has a dinner just opposite said club, many years ago."

Ted obviously knew about this case; for it had been in the papers, and he said as much: “Oh yes, that was about the club owner who brought the case against two women selling poppies outside his establishment. If my memory serves me correctly a member of his staff had stopped them doing this and told them to move on.”

Roster beamed back: “That is correct. The case became quite famous, known in the press as the Poppy People case.”

This was of great interest to Moina. So much so that she started to relax and enjoy the company. Ted seeing her do so naturally followed suit.

As she gently caressed the side of her champagne glass, that she had brought out into the garden area, Moina thought about what she was going to say next. As if only half interested, she asked Roster: “Why did they stop them selling poppies?”

As Moina looked at the lawyer opposite her, she could see by his eyes he had drifted back into the courtroom and to the day of the trial. He was no doubt a great man there.

Roster replied, judiciously: "The old war moaners. Yes, that was the phrase used by the bar worker. The jury came down on the side of the Poppy seller, as soon as they heard that derogatory remark. From that moment on the case was as good as closed."

"War moaners," repeated Moina. "Why was that significant?"

Ted interrupted: "There are always people who object to everything and anything in life. Doesn't go down well in a court."

This did not satisfy Moina: "Why," she asked Roster gently, "Was your client against the selling of poppies?"

Roster lifted his glass of mineral water: “Because my client felt that people who keep going on about war have no place outside his establishment. In this instance, the jury did not agree.”

“Thank goodness for that,” exclaimed Moina. “You only have a jury because we fought the fascists and defeated them.”

Boy Brodie must have liked her passion. As if talking to one of his mates in the pub, he said as much: “There is a group in our local area, you know, who don’t like democracy. They are called Absolute Force.”

“That’s just daft,” replied Moina, staring at him, “It is a lovely way to celebrate your history by remembering those who fought and died for your country.”

Moina could hardly contain herself now, but she kept calm; for she wanted to find out more about this group, and

moreover what Roster was up to representing them. “Was he a fascist too, she wondered.”

She asked Boy Brodie: “Where do these Absolute Nupties hang out?”

Boy Brodie seemed to know: “In town, a place called the Brawn café.”

“Who is their leader?”

“He is called Kent. He hates all soldiers and veterans - he hates everything about war.”

Ted knew about him and said as much:

“He lives just around the corner from you, Moina. I am surprised you don’t know him.”

Moina had to think for a moment: “Is that the chap who stays at the corner, the house opposite the bus stop, and drives the security van.”

“That’s the fellow,” confirmed Ted.

For good measure Boy Brodie butted in again. “He is always with his mate Fritz Wolf, the property guy.”

Moina didn’t know him, and for the moment she just listened to the solicitor, and her friend Ted the reporter go on about other mundane matters that were affecting the country at the moment. Roster maintained that due to the new government legislation the rich were now investing in gold, and other such wonders.

Moina had got to the stage she never followed the news bulletins or politics anymore. Her mind on hearing the mundane topic started to drift elsewhere. She thought of an old saying her father liked to use: “What a drag.”

The great thing was though that even though she avoided the daily dose of headlines, she could catch the drift of what was going on in the country. This she

could do just by following what was being said by who was saying it.

However, when people spoke about such issues, reported in the press, it did not affect her. Moina could even add something to the debate, or make a comment, but it did not interfere in any shape or form with her thoughts - like it did when she use to follow the daily media reports on television and the Internet. Now free from it all, it was as if it was all happening in another realm somewhere, far from her - and maybe it was.

4

A few days later, Moina went to the Mitchell library in town with a view to reading all the articles she could find as regards: The Poppy People case. She knew this was the biggest reference library in Europe, and they would have all the information there ready to hand for her.

Moina was not disappointed. Just before midday that Saturday, she arrived at the library and was well served by a conscientious assistant. It was fortunate that she met the young lad on the fourth floor landing before going inside. The young lad was so keen to help that he even got a carrel for her to study in.

So that afternoon, inside a cosy carrel on the fourth floor of the bibliotheca, Moina read with interest that Roster had not been successful in stopping the two sellers' selling poppies on the street outside the restaurant Osteria. He had acted on behalf of his client, a Mr Borman from Whiteinch.

It was clear from reading the press reports that the owner was against the ceremony, and moreover the institutions of the United Kingdom.

In future, Moina knew she would have to keep an eye out for such people who

were against celebrating Armistice Day. She did not want to have anything to do with them.

When she thought about it, it was Remembrance Sunday in a few weeks time. Moina, like many others, would most definitely be remembering what people had fought and died for.

Ever since the time her dad told her that she was named after the founder of the Poppy emblem, Moina was enthusiastic for the cause. From that day on she had read everything and anything about the movement.

Moina was as up-to-date as anyone on the planet could be on the history of the Poppy People. Anyone who said anything against Poppy People would be most definitely be challenged, if she was about.

In any event, Moina had always been sympathetic to the wearing of the poppy,

even though she had scant knowledge of the history of the movement.

Like so many others in life, after reading about the origin of the poppy and its founders, she went on to research the First World War, and was fascinated by it. It seemed a different time, though in some way familiar to her. She even planned next year to visit Flanders Fields where the battles had been fought and where she knew the poppies still grew.

Moina was most definitely a Poppy person now. She would make sure the likes of Mr Borman, and his solicitor friend Micheal Roster, would not tarnish the reputation of the dead, who had fought and died for the freedom and liberty of her country.

Without further ado, Moina set up a beautiful website. She uploaded some old photographs of soldiers to it that she had come across in her mother's house.

Apparently, those old photos had been passed on to her mother by her gran. They were always kept in the cupboard where the boiler used to be.

Wherever they had come from, the lovely old black and white photos showed the contribution made to both World Wars, by men and women. Although the people in the old photographs must have been connected to her family, she was not sure who they were.

That night cuddled up in bed in her flat, Moina could not help but wonder why people were forgetting about the sacrifices of others.

"I am going to do my bit, as the saying goes," she promised herself, "I will personally see to it that the war dead will be remembered. Their contribution, so that we can live in peace in our democratic country, will not be forgotten about. This will be brought to the attention of others.

All those people who fought and died on the battlefields, in their homes, on ships, and flying high in the air - they will be remembered."

5

On Monday morning, as soon as Moina woke up, an idea came into her head: “I know what I will do, I will make up cards with the name of my Poppy People website, and give them out to friends when

I meet them. Yes, my generation will not be ignorant about the fallen."

She was so enthusiastic about what she was going to do that she nearly forgot she had work to go to today at nine o'clock this morning.

Moina's social life may have been dull. There was nothing unusual about that at this time; for the virus threat had broken up all social structures in society. Going to the pub, taking part in sports events, booking holidays abroad, had all been affected.

It was just as well Moina liked her job at the hotel in her local area. The Grand Hotel, situated in the Merrylea area, was not all that far from where she stayed. She could be there in ten minutes.

However, this new venture of giving out cards to people on the street, on the train, or on the bus, really made Moina happy. It was a good message she knew she

was passing on. She was, as the modern saying of the time goes, super excited.

Even before her shower and cereal that morning, Moina went online and ordered 1000 business cards. She made a lovely design on her computer of two poppies crossing over each other, and added some words under the image that read:

Lest we forget
What we have got
What we fought for

On her personal iPad at work later that day, when things were quiet, Moina further developed her Poppy People website. Pictures of wars right back to Napoleonic times she uploaded, as well as photos of modern conflicts. The memorabilia from her gran was a real treasure to have been left. She had already scanned all the photos into her tablet. No

one else in the family showed any interest in having them anyway.

Moina loved things like this related to the past. Old photos and letters somehow transported her to another time. Moreover, they took her out of the modern nightmare world of 2022, where there seemed to be no established religion, culture, or community that she could hang on to.

"Yes, information from my site, Poppy People, will be sought after all over the world. Now the fun really begins," she thought to herself, as she updated her website, "I will stick up for the Poppy People in this age of gender confusion."

She was sick of listening to her friends arguing over pronouns, or conversion therapy, or going on and on about how great they were, and how many friends they had on the Internet.

“I will remember the brave men and women who gave their lives, so that we can live in freedom. Yes, that is worth talking about.”

Moina promised herself that whatever happened she would have great fun with this campaign. She looked forward to engaging with those people who have no time for the past or the present. The ‘every day moaners,’ she had heard about.

Moina really liked working in the local hotel, especially helping out at the bar when they got busy there. This normally happened during the weekend.

The proprietor Mr Duncan was not your typical owner. He was working class in the best sense of that term. Always generous to those who knew him. He was well known for putting on charity events for pressure groups and social activists.

Mr Duncan had a strange idea about time though. He often mentioned this to

Moina. For whatever reason, time was constantly being taken away from him: “I had a meeting this morning with the bank. That’s another two hours, I won’t get back of my life.”

She could not understand this at all. What does he mean? Mr Duncan was a strange combination of things. He thought himself a millionaire, but he certainly did not act as if he had any money. The proprietor may have been a strange fellow, but not a stranger, and that she liked. He was funny with it and always good company.

The other thing that stood out about Mr Duncan was he wore the most tight-fitting white trousers she had ever seen. It was the talk of the Merrylea area.

Moina had never seen anything like it. She reckoned it was to show off his trouser bulge. Sometimes he would push his groin out when speaking to clients at the

reception desk. For those who knew him, it was all very macho, hilarious, and to quote a war expression: over the top.

Mr Duncan's wife Luiza came in every other day to do the accounts for the Grand Hotel. She had a little office just behind the reception desk where Moina worked.

Everyone liked his wife Luiza, including Moina. She was a quiet soul who hardly spoke to anyone. Mr Duncan called her madam, as if he was a French man and she a French woman.

"Where is madam?" he would say to Moina when he came past the reception area. "Are you with us, my dear?" He usually added before popping his head inside the office door.

That morning once again, Moina stood behind the reception desk and got herself ready for another day to meet guests and visitors at the Grand Hotel.

“Mr Duncan cannot be a bad fellow,” she murmured to herself, as she fixed her hair, “After all, he employed me.”

The characters who came into the Grand Hotel in the Merrylea area, on the south side of Glasgow, ranged from the elderly to the young. It was also the haunt for the new on the go creative people who liked to have a coffee and work on their lap tops and tablets in the lounge bar.

Moina could handle most of them. She was known for her hard work and attention to detail with both guests and customers. It is fair to say she was liked by most of them.

The guests and customers could see Moina was reliable. In fact, she had been asked many times if she wanted to go full time by Mr Duncan. Moina was happy though with the hours she had agreed to when she took up the receptionist position here two years ago. The position of part-

time hotel receptionist, and the hours she worked, suited her right down to the ground.

6

Out of all the people who came through the main door of the Grand Hotel in the Merrylea area, there was only one character Moina could not fathom out. He was a foreigner named Mustafa Pasha.

This dark skinned young man with cropped black hair everyone thought

looked a bit like the deceased pop star Freddie Mercury. He was certainly as enigmatic as him, though in no way was he a showman.

She knew that Mustafa Pasha came to Scotland six months ago. He was of Turkish origin and was studying here to be a doctor or a surgeon, or something like that. At the outset, he told Mr Duncan the manager this.

Yes, out of all the guests staying in the Grand Hotel, in the Merrylea area, he was the most intriguing. Moina saw him every day when he came down from his room for his breakfast.

Mustafa always went into the restaurant around 9.30am. From the outset, she noticed he did not like to sit with any of the other guests. His sallow skin made him look at times unwell, but there was no sign of any ill health.

Mustafa Pasha was usually joined after breakfast in the reception area by a fellow student named Carlos Scarafaggio 'Cockroach' to his friends.

Carlos lived near the hotel. He was a freethinker and well known part time anarchist. Carlos was always up for any demo. Needless to say, he was well known in the local area.

Early in the morning, he always came into the hotel and bought himself a coffee from the bar and then waited in the reception area for Mustafa to finish his breakfast.

Thereafter they would commune together on the seats for a time, before heading for the bus. Both were studying at the same university.

The thing that Moina thought drew them together was not so much they were students, but that they were both republicans. There was nothing unusual

about that with students. To be fair, Glasgow in certain parts was inclined that way.

However, she could see that what interested Mustafa Pasha was the political system of the United Kingdom. He was forever asking Carlos Scarafaggio questions about the union.

As she stood there at reception, Mustafa's voice came back to her. With a slight lisp she remembered, what he had said to the Cockroach just the other day: "When do you think Scotland will become independent?"

This intrigued her. "Why should he be interested in our affairs?" she wondered.

Mustafa Pasha that morning, as usual after his breakfast, came out of the dinning room and sat down opposite the reception area and chatted to Carlos his friend there.

After Moina had served Mustafa with his Americano coffee, she went back to the reception desk where she watched the two of them closely.

Sitting there by the window Mustafa stirred his coffee cup slowly. Moina had witnessed this ceremony many times before. It seemed to be a ritual for him to commune with some outer force out there in the world. Mustafa looked at all times as if he was somewhere else.

Round and round the spoon would go anticlockwise twenty times, then clockwise for another twenty, and on and on it would go. The other strange thing about this man was that he opened one sachet of sugar after another. In all she counted 10 sachets.

With the manners of a skilled surgeon he emptied them one by one into his cup. To her it seemed an astonishing amount of sugar, for anyone to take. Then it was back

to stirring his cup again, round twenty times anticlockwise, then back round clockwise twenty times.

After about five minutes it was time to drink it. Then it was out with his expensive mobile phone - the latest one of course. After a quick check here and there on the Internet, he would stare faraway into that other world again. It was definitely somewhere obscure he went to.

Moina thought to herself: "No doubt where strange religious practices are being carried out, where there is some idol, great statue, or god, to guide him."

She noticed too that although he opened his big medical book when he sat in the reception area, Mustafa never seemed to read it. Now and again, he leafed it and for sure he seemed to have knowledge of what he needed from it.

Wherever Mustafa went the book went with him too; it was always beside him.

Nothing unusual about that; after all it was medicine he was studying.

When his friend Carlos the Cockroach saw his friend that morning sitting in the reception area, he was anxious to speak to him: "We need to get things moving Mustafa. We can't hang about now..."

Mustafa looked down at his large medical book on the coffee table beside him. Before he spoke, he picked up his mobile phone to check the time: "We must be patient, Carlos?" he said ignoring him.

Moina could see from her watchtower at the reception desk that the two students never talked and joked the way other young lads did.

She took this to be a cultural thing. After all, they were two people from different countries. However, they obviously had a shared interest in something, but not wanting to share all that much else with each other.

At their age most young lads were teasing one another, or talking about what they were up to online, or at college, or university. Not so these two. They seemed to be planning something though what that was, she could not say.

Moina listened out for a word or two that would fill this void in. But a large gap always remained there between the two of them, as if what it was would always be a mystery to her. Whatever they were doing was indeed hidden from the public and from all others around them.

"There is no turning back now?" she heard Carlos the Cockroach say in a cryptic cheeky tone.

It was obvious that whatever the Cockroach wanted to talk about could only be done so in private; for nothing followed on from this strange comment.

However, just before they got ready to leave and board the 11am bus that

morning, to take them to the university, Moina overheard Mustafa say something odd to the Cockroach. In a strange muffled tone, he whispered: "KTPP," and pointed to the sky.

Moina thought she would get a bit closer and try and find out more about what was going on. She went over and cleaned the table next to the window, near to where they sat.

Mustafa saw her do this and to make sure the Cockroach did not say anything out of turn, he declared: "What is more beautiful than silence, my friend," and smiled at him.

"That's a very odd thing to say," thought Moina, as she lifted up a magazine to wipe under it.

Not only that, this was the only time she had ever seen him being emotional. Moina picked up the empty packet of crisps that someone had left on the table

near to the door of the restaurant, then she lifted another empty tumbler next to it and went back to the reception desk.

Mustafa looked annoyed at her; for the tumbler in her hand knocked against the table where he sat. She could see that this had interrupted his ecstatic thoughts. She also noticed he watched her closely as she walked away.

The reception area where the guests could relax was quite comfortable. There was a large table there, a plush satee and two chairs.

Moina always thought the seat by the door though next to the restaurant did not seem to fit in with this leisure area. Somehow it seemed to be lost on its own. In a strange way it did not seem part of the Grand Hotel. Consequently, no one ever sat there.

To distract herself from her strange guest, Moina thought about the place

where she worked. She liked her job and was happy to be here.

Just as she got behind the reception desk again, she remembered that a workman had come in and wanted access to the kitchen area to sort some electrical appliance. He would no doubt be leaving an invoice with her on the way out. She may even have to pay him. Mr Duncan was a great cash in hand man.

Not only that, guests would be arriving soon for the weekend. She checked the computer to see what the state of play was with incoming emails.

The Turkish man had stayed here in the Grand Hotel now for about six weeks. Every Friday she knew he paid his bill at the reception desk.

Today was the day he came up to her and stared at her before saying in that strange tone of his: “Please, may I extend my stay for another week.”

Mr Duncan had told Moina always to do this: “Yes, book him in, and reserve it for the following week too. This will keep everything Tickety-boo.”

She knew it was good business for the hotel to have a resident guest like that, even if he was an oddball.

She often wondered when new faces appeared at the reception desk where they came from? Moina often got quite a surprise when they told her.

It was incredible that there were still foreign tourists coming over to the UK with all the trouble going on in Europe: War in Ukraine; the virus still raging on.

Moina would not dare to travel abroad at this time. She knew that you could get hammered by a penalty payment if you had to isolate. The authorities in the UK and abroad could lock you down and isolate citizens any time they wanted to.

Travellers who thought they were going away for a lovely break could suddenly find themselves in an airport hotel, or private holding area. That in turn could run up a huge bill - much more than the holiday would ever cost them.

Like Moina most folks these days never contemplated going away abroad.

7

That Friday afternoon in a fancy coffee place in town named Chadwick's sat a foreign man, opposite the till. He was easily recognised by his sallow skin and taciturn look. Those who had seen him before knew his hypnotic gaze, and how it

never changed, no matter what time of day it was.

Most of the staff in the restaurant knew Mustafa Pasha to look at; for he came in every other day. Although polite when asking for coffee, Mustafa never chatted to any of them.

It was always the same he ordered: soup of the day, followed by a sandwich, then a coffee. It was with the latter that the ceremony began once more.

One after another ten sachets of sugar were opened, and emptied into his coffee cup. After that was done, the ritual of stirring began: anticlockwise twenty times, then round his cup clockwise he went again for another twenty the other way.

Mustafa Pasha always stayed for about an hour in Chadwick's restaurant. His medical book beside him on the table along with his ritzy new mobile phone next to it.

This picture of him of course told others he was active in the pursuit of medical knowledge, at the same time as being right up to date in the communication world.

At times, he would leaf his medical book, but more often than not he would get distracted, pick up his modern phone and search for something.

Everyone who looked his way could see that he was studying medicine. Naturally, most folks drew the conclusion that he was going to be a doctor or surgeon.

If they did, they were not wrong, but there was something else in the mind of this man. The observational eye noticed that he watched people as if they were accessories to his own silent thoughts. What lay within that strange world within though no one knew.

One such observant soul who was watching him in Chadwick's that day was

Moina the Poppy Lady, as her friends called her now. She liked Chadwick's. Moina often popped in there on her lunch hour.

After all, it was only a ten-minute ride on the bus into town. She felt it broke up the working day at the hotel. If she was honest she liked the carrot cake they served here.

As she waited in the queue to buy herself a cup of coffee, she watched Mustafa Pasha closely. For whatever reason she noticed that he always sat opposite the till where customers stood and ordered their food and drinks from. She had seen him sitting there before.

"Yes, I am going to have my favourite carrot cake today," she mused, as she waited in line. "Wildly expensive, I know, but its Friday after all, and as granddad used to say: that was the week that was."

Moina thought she should sit not far from her hotel guest, though just out of sight of him. She spotted a table behind the partition, and it was there she planned to head for after she got her order.

She was not attracted to him in anyway, but for some unknown reason she sensed a magnetic pull towards the Turkish man, and this above all other things kept her interested in him. It was as if he had something special that made her do this.

When she thought about it though she could not reason that out. "Whatever in the world could he have for me," she could not imagine.

"I won't let on I have seen him sitting there," she told herself, as she moved up the queue.

When her turn came she automatically spoke as if that was all that was in her mind: "Carrot cake and one shot of coffee with hot milk, please."

Carefully Moina took the cup and cake from the young waitress, placed them on the tray and off she went to the table behind the partition.

As soon as she sat down there, on her own in one of the comfortable booths, she mused about the rest of the day: "Well must enjoy my break, before I head back to the Grand Hotel."

Going to Chadwick's restaurant was always a treat. It was well known in the city that the large tearoom attracted the right sort of people.

The cakes were the best in town - there was no doubt about that. She had heard they were made down south by a special baker from Harrogate, and shipped up in the morning to Scotland: "Just for me," she smiled, as she took a bite of one.

Later that day at the reception desk in the Grand Hotel, Moina booked in an American couple from Louisiana. As she

did so, she looked up at the clock. The afternoon had gone quickly. It was almost four o'clock now.

She was quite happy with herself: "Yes, time is running away with itself again,"she quipped, as she photocopied the passports of the two American guests.

It was true it had been nonstop ever since getting back from the excursion into town. "I had better grab another cuppa before helping chef with the evening menu," she told herself.

Before putting the passports in the safe, Moina looked at the photos of her American guests. She always did this. As she was looking at the stern face in the passport of the woman from Louisiana, her shrill voice boomed from the counter over her shoulder: "I need a morning call tomorrow, dearie. Early doors, as you folks would say over here. We are going to the capital to find out about this character

Grey Friars Bobby. You know anything about him?"

Moina, as she turned round, shook her head, smiled and then went to the computer and inputted the morning call into it for the American woman: "I am sure you will enjoy the trip madam. Edinburgh is a lovely city."

Just then her co-worker Peter appeared. And as soon as she saw him, she picked up her handbag from under the desk and went outside for a cup of tea across the road to the Italian café there. It was always coffee in the morning and tea in the afternoon for Moina the Poppy Lady.

Moina liked the woman who owned the Italian café bar. Concetta was her name; she was always pleasant to Moina when she went there. They talked about places in Italy best to visit in the summer.

The café across the road was quiet as usual when she arrived. It was always like

that in the afternoon. After chatting to Lisa the owner's daughter, Moina sat by the window and there looked back out across the road at the place where she was employed: The Grand Hotel. She liked doing this.

It was nice to look out at the building. In many ways to her it resembled an old medieval castle. It was such an interesting place to work. She really did feel blessed that she had got a job there.

Presently, a cup of tea arrived for her. The young lad who brought it to her she noticed gazed down at his client before putting the cup on the table. Moina knew that he had not long started working here.

She could see he had yet to find within himself the art of conversation. He nodded after putting the bill down beside the cup.

"Enjoy," was his only spoken word.

“The young all say that,” thought Moina to herself smiling.

“Enjoy - well, I will,” she told herself.

Just as she lifted up her cup and was about to take a sip, she heard a familiar voice behind her say. “We are on course for next week: KTPP.”

She recognised the voice right away; it was Mustafa Pasha. What a strange thing to say. She couldn’t see who it was he was talking to, but she knew Mustafa’s voice all right.

A few moments later out of the corner of her eye she saw the Turkish man go past her and head towards the signora. Concetta always worked at the faraway food counter where they made up lasagne and other take away dishes.

Apparently, he wanted more mineral water and after getting some, Mustafa returned to his seat again.

As soon as he sat down Moina's ears picked up again: "I didn't know he came in here."

She looked over again and this time saw who it was beside him. Moina should have guessed who it was. It was of course his sidekick Carlos the Cockroach sitting there staring out of the window.

"Surprise, surprise, eh."

Mustafa Pasha had such a strange accent she would recognise it anywhere. His voice was high and at all times gave the feeling to others that he was excited, but when you saw him speaking, he looked deadpan. You could see the contradiction just by looking at him. Mustafa always looked strange, anything but natural in his surroundings.

"I will get things organised," said the Cockroach, then there was a pause.

Mustafa Pasha answered him in an ecstatic tone: "We need to be careful,

Carlos. Speak only of good things. No one can stop us now, my friend."

Moina could not sleep that night; she knew they were up to something. But what was it?

"What is KTPP?" she kept asking herself, as the letters kept running around inside her head.

8

Saturday was busy as usual at the Grand Hotel, with day trippers coming into the restaurant and into the bar. At around 3pm, when things were beginning to settle down, the phone rang at reception. It was

the cleaner Betsy. She was quite excited, almost in a panic she was: “Moina, I was only hoovering. I must have bumped the wardrobe and down it came...

“What came down Betsy?”

“A large bag of sugar; it’s spilled all over the floor. Moina, can you come up and help me clean it up before that Turkish man comes back?”

When Moina arrived in room 23, the door was open and she went inside. Betsy was running around like the proverbial blue arse fly? This made Moina laugh.

However, Betsy did not see the joke. She was quite alarmed. Betsy turned off the hoover and went to meet her. “I can't clean it up - it is too much for me...”

To calm her down, in a stern tone, Moina offered a solution: “Just leave it, Betsy. I will phone Bert and ask him to bring up the industrial cleaner?”

It was obvious that it was an accident. She could see that a large packet of sugar had indeed fallen down from the top of the wardrobe and had certainly got everywhere.

Betsy with her hand on the hoover, as if it never left her side, exclaimed in a worried tone: "I saw it up there the other day, but I must have bumped the wardrobe, and down it came."

"Ok, Betsy, we will get it cleared up," said Moina in her usual efficient way: "I will speak with Bert. He will bring over the industrial hoover and we will get another bag of sugar for our Turkish guest. Don't worry, when he returns, he will never know the difference."

On the way down the stairs, Moina got out her mobile phone, found Bert the maintenance man's number and rang him. She knew he lived just across the road from the hotel, and he was always

available to help out when needs be. Although Bert was an electrician by trade, he could turn his hand to anything.

When Bert heard Moina's voice that morning, he immediately responded: "Hi Moina. You want me to play the piano on Saturday night, in the bar again. No problem, always available for a shuffle on the old keys, you know me…"

"I am sure that will be fine Bert, but meantime can you bring over the industrial hoover to room number 23."

Moina knew that he would help her. Mr Duncan always gave him odd jobs to do. He was always getting free beer at the bar.

"And Bert after that can you go to the supermarket and buy a large bag of sugar. I will tell you the brand, when you arrive."

"And here is me thinking I had received a special request from a customer to preform again at the Grand Hotel..."

“We need it now, Bert.”

“Right, I am on my way...”

In less than half an hour it was all sorted. When Moina got back to the reception desk, she took the letters from the postman, and put them in the office. After that she phoned Eddie the night porter to ask him if he would do an extra shift next week, then she went back up to see how Betsy, her friend, the cleaner was getting on.

Moina found her still in the Turkish man’s room admiring Bert’s handiwork.

“Moina I don’t know what I would do without you,” said Betsy looking around the room. “Look how clean it is.”

Then after a moment of silence, she mentioned to her: “Moina this must have dropped down the side of the bed. It was lying there in the corner at the side of the door. That Turkish chap is usually tidy. He never leaves anything lying around.”

“That’s not the phone he brings down to the bar with him; it’s another one,” said Moina taking it from her.

“And there was also this letter too lying beside it under his bed.”

Moina knew Mustafa Pasha was in town today at the university. When he went there he usually spent most of the time in the library studying, and did not come back until around 5 o’clock in the evening.

She knew this, for when he returned late last Wednesday night he missed his evening meal, and he apologised to her: “I am sorry I was in the library all day today and missed the bus due to that fact,” she remembered him saying.

It was a strange room where he lived; spartan, but it always had a foreign aroma about it. You could see from looking in his bathroom that Mustafa Pasha used a lot of perfume, aftershave and cologne. This mix

made the odour even sweeter and it gave the visitor an impression that he, or she, was standing inside a perfume counter in a high street store rather than a hotel bedroom.

Moina bent over the bed and looked down to see if there was anything else of interest lying around. She knew he was involved with something dark and dangerous, but what she could not say.

"Well, Mustafa Pasha's room is certainly tidy again," she said looking around, "Is it not?" Nothing is out of place in here Betsy. The Koran beside his bed, and the bowl of sweets next to it over there..."

Betsy interrupted her: "And a new shirt pressed every morning, ready to wear, hanging over the chair."

Just after saying her thoughts out loud, Betsy informed her: "When I think about

it that Turkish guy, you know, wears a different colour of shirt every day."

"Really," said Moina, "Can't say I have noticed. "He usually has his jacket on when he comes down stairs."

Betsy asked her, as if annoyed: "What is that sweet smell Moina?"

"Oh, that is spices from the East; he must have brought them over here with him."

Betsy laughed: "I thought it was his aftershave."

"Well, I see he does use a ton of that stuff as well; but that will only linger for a time. The scent from the spices will always remain."

"His phone must have fell from the chair by the bedroom table," affirmed Betsy. "It must have dropped down there."

Just as Moina was about to go out of the room, she saw lying there under the

single bed, a piece of paper. It must have fallen to the ground too."

It was lodged behind the bed leg and the wall. Moina was curious and she bent down and picked it up and read it to herself.

Follow the instructions when you get to London: KTPP.

"There it is again KTPP. What does it mean?"

Betsy popped her nose over Moina's shoulder: "Anything interesting?"

"I don't know," said Moina. "Don't worry Betsy, the room looks new again. Everything will be fine."

After taking a picture of the note and the letter on her phone, found under the bed, she told Betsy: "Just leave the phone and the letter where you found them," and

she too did likewise and dropped the piece of paper back down below the bed.

Just before they both left the room. Moina noticed his medical book there on his bedside table. Moina picked it up and opened it. What a surprise she got. It was not full of medical information at all, but every page was full of coding, the kind you use in computers.

"See you later, Betsy."

Before going to bed that night Moina read a few pages of the latest book she had downloaded from the internet. The one she was reading at the moment was about *Eva Brawn*, written by a woman called Heike Görtemaker.

Moina was enjoying it, but she was tired so after getting to the part where Eva was part of the inner circle at the Bergholf, she put it down, curled up for the night and tried to go to sleep.

Just as she was drifting from the unconscious world into the never never land, it suddenly hit her what KTPP was: 'Kill the Poppy People!'

"Of course, that's it! Next Sunday is Armistice Sunday. They are going to plant a bomb at the Cenotaph in London. I am sure of that, I must find out more before it is too late."

There was no doubt about it Mustafa Pasha and his accomplice Carlos the Cockroach were most decidedly up to something. She knew that much. She had seen with her own eyes how the two men interacted with each other inside the Grand Hotel.

The strange thing was though, even when they sat close to each other they did not say very much. She knew Carlos sometimes visited Mustafa Pasha in his room. What they did there she did not know. Mercifully she fell asleep.

9

Next day, early in the morning, Moina broke off from helping out with the breakfast requests. Her thoughts about the Turkish guest in the hotel were now starting to preoccupy her.

She wondered if she should phone someone. Moina knew Colin Williams was still in the police. He often came into the hotel for a pint when the football was on in the bar.

On second thoughts was that wise? There was a great mistrust of the local police these days, after the affair at the manse when an innocent woman was poisoned by a disgruntled female elder. The police, who had connections at the church, tried to cover it up.

There was a general opinion that the local police these days had more powers than the *Stasi*. They arrested people for next to nothing without questioning them. Many cases never came to trial. Smart people kept well away from them.

Colin was a nice chap. She knew him quite well; for his sister kept in touch with her via social media.

As she stood at the reception desk wondering what to do, she glanced over at Mustafa Pasha. He had just come out of the restaurant and, as he always did at this time of the morning, he sat over in the area in front of the reception desk. He was a dreamer all right - there was no doubt about that. She knew he would be off to the university in town soon.

“I know what you are up to,” wrote Moina on the little pad, she kept at the reception desk.

Moina could see he was a fanatic, and like all fanatics his gaze was menacing. After thinking about things - even though he was up to no good - she would not phone Colin. Moina would deal with it herself.

With interest she watched the morning ceremony again. What a strange thing it was to see. Ten sachets of sugar were opened, and one by one emptied into his

coffee cup. She counted again how many times he stirred his cup. Yes, it was twenty times anti clockwise, then twenty times clockwise.

Just before leaving and signing off that evening, Moina did what she always did: she checked all the customers' requests had been answered by email.

As she looked up at the clock on the faraway wall, she saw old Mr Jones, as she called him, standing there. He was getting ready to move from the lounge to the bar, no doubt to watch the television there. The rest of the guests were all in their rooms.

After checking her email system again, she went over to see if he wanted anything before she left: "Would you like another cup of tea, Mr Jones?"

"No thanks, my dear. I am getting ready for something stronger at the bar," he beamed: "My team is playing tonight -

big European tie. We need to win this one."

"Good luck Mr Jones. Have a good night."

She then from the fake fire place where he was standing walked over to see if the man from room nineteen wanted anything from her before she headed home.

However, just at that moment, Mustafa Pasha appeared. He looked over at her from that strange world he inhabited. Before he sat down in his usual seat at reception, he said in broken English: "What team is playing tonight?" and just stared at her.

It was an odd look: "A grin with a smirk hidden behind it," she registered.

Moina did not know and said as much "Don't ask me, I wouldn't know."

Just then, in came Carlos the Cockroach to speak with the Turkish man. There was nothing unusual about that,

though this time she noticed Carlos seemed agitated about something.

As he sat down beside his Turkish cohort, Carlos said out of breath: “I managed to get the tickets, all right - but it wasn’t easy; the ticket office at Central Station was shut, lack of staff. They are dropping like flies in there - down with the covid. I had to go to Queen Street and get them there.”

Mustafa Pasha turned and looked at him as if studying his face for illness “Could you not do it online?”

“No, you told me not to leave any digital trace.”

“Of course.”

“I need more money.”

“Did you keep your hood up in the ticket office.”

“Yes, you think I am daft.”

“Was it an early train you got?”

“No, we are travelling on the night train next Friday, so you had better get ready for that,” forewarned the Cockroach and laughed.

Mustafa just stared at him: “You like you little jokes, Carlos.”

“No, seriously, look here are the tickets.”

“What time do we get there?" asked Mustafa, looking up from his comfortable chair?

“We arrive in the capital at 6.30am Saturday morning.”

Moina hurried back to the reception desk. She needed to put away invoices she had received in the post, they were always put in the drawer under the desk for Mr Duncan to deal with when he came in.

As she locked the drawer under the reception desk, she couldn’t help but wonder: “What are they up to, these two,

going to London next Friday on the night train?"

She was convinced after reading the letter in his room that Mustafa was building a bomb: "But where and when are they going to plant it?"

Her conscious thoughts told her she had to act, then she reminded herself: "Well, it is not until next week they go. I have some time to figure things out, and I am off that weekend too."

Moina knew her friend Jacqueline liked the open-air bar in town the Rialto. She thought it a good idea to phone her and see if she wanted to go along tonight. It was well known that Friday night used to be good there before lockdown interrupted everything.

The real reason, however, for Moina wanting to go was that she had heard Mustafa and the Cockroach went there on a Friday evening to chill out, as they say.

Moina wanted to see if she could find out more about what was going on between them.

Jacqueline, her best friend from school, was always available for a night out. Before leaving the hotel that night, Moina phoned her from the reception desk: "Good evening, this is the Migrant Hotel calling. Can I speak to Jacqueline Lawrence, please?"

"Moina, how are you? What have you been up to?"

"Well, it's all happening here, I tell you. The chef is upset with that Turkish man again. Apparently, he has complained about the fish being overcooked."

"Have you still got him staying with you."

"Yes, he is our long-term guest, according to Mr Duncan."

"Is Mr Duncan still pouring himself into his white tight fitting trousers?"

"You better believe it. Listen, Jacqueline have you got tonight off?"

"I have. How did you know that?"

"Do you want to meet up?"

"Where do you what to go?"

"Your local, the Rialto."

"That will be great Moina. I haven't seen you since Peter Packington got married. You remember that one, don't you?"

"Who could forget it - even better than mine."

"Oh, don't say that, Moina."

"See you at 8pm, Jacqueline."

"Right, Moina, I'll be there."

Even though she knew he frequented pubs with the Cockroach, Mustafa Pasha was not a pub person. You could tell that just by looking at him.

Having thought about him on the way into town Moina was still surprised when she got there to see Mustafa sitting inside

the Rialto bar with his cohort the Cockroach. The Rialto bar pre lockdown was always jam-packed, but now it was just like all other bars in the city on a Friday night: half empty.

Moina smiled over to her hotel guest as she entered the small bar. She could not really ignore him for the bar was quiet, and anyone who walked inside was noticed. Mustafa Pasha grinned back at her in his usual way. Strangely enough, he did not seem surprised to see her.

Jacqueline came in a few moments later and suggested to her that they sit at the bar: "You always get chatted up there," she boasted to Moina.

Moina knew it did not really get busy until later in town these days, and there was little chance of that. However, she took her coat off and put it over the bar stool and sat down. Just as she was doing this, she noticed the Cockroach nudge

Mustafa as if to say: “Look who Moina’s with.”

Moments later Carlos the Cockroach came over and enquired what they wished to drink. To his credit, his rough voice tried to make a good impression. Bending forward, he muttered in a strange polite tone: “The gentleman over there wants to buy you ladies some champagne,” and for good effect he nodded towards Mustafa Pasha.

This was obviously meant to impress the ladies and did so. They could not really refuse the offer, and both knew they would now have to go over and join him at his table opposite the bar.

“We had better go over,” murmured Jacqueline after the Cockroach had gone.

Moina of course was delighted. She could try and find out more about what was going on between the two jihadis.

Without giving it another thought, she boldly said to Jacqueline: “Right let’s up sticks and go. After all, this is our long-term guest in the hotel and we should respect him.”

“Really,” said Jacqueline as if she had won the lottery: “He has obviously got a few bob.”

This was what Moina wanted: a relaxed atmosphere. She would be able to keep an eye on the two of them, and try and find out more about the KTPP plot.

After they had sat down at Mustafa’s table, Moina introduced her friend to him. However, Mustafa Pasha just stared and smiled at her as if she were an exotic animal in a zoo.

Then as if to act normal the Turkish man confirmed his intention. He asked in his usual monosyllabic way: “Ladies, I would like to buy you a bottle of champagne? Please be my guest.”

Just after saying this, the offer was confirmed to a young Polish waitress who had come over in expectation of a good order. She was super efficient and in no time at all appeared back at the table with an ice bucket with one bottle of champagne pointing out of it, a pint of lager and a cup of coffee on the tray beside it.

After the champagne bottle was poured into the two long glasses, the waitress smiled at Moina. If Jacqueline had been worried about the company whatever lingered in her mind, simply disappeared into thin air.

Moina was not a drinker, but Jacqueline was and by the look on her face the champagne would not go to waste. Moina decided before she sipped her drink that she would only have the one glass.

After the waitress had departed and after tasting her drink, looking across the

table directly at Mustafa Pasha, Jacqueline enquired: “Have you seen much of Scotland?”

“I have been to Edinburgh and also Kirkcudbrightshire,” he answered in his usual dull pathetic way.

“Really how exciting,” exclaimed Jacqueline, before enjoying another sip of bubbly.

Moina for something to say interjected: “I have not really seen much of my own country. But I always get such a surprise when I travel up north, how lovely it is.”

The conversation died after this for a few moments, so Jacqueline thought she had better think of up something new and say it. Noticing a young lad heading out of the Rialto bar, she observed: “Going for a smoke these days is like going into a fridge. I am glad I chucked it.”

Moina nodded in agreement as she noticed another smoker through the Rialto

bar window. The poor thing was shivering away in a thin dress while puffing constantly on a long-filtered cigarette.

"Next week we are going to London announced the Cockroach. We are going to see the sights aren't we Mustafa?"

Mustafa looked slightly worried as he looked over at him. He replied cautiously "Yes, London next week."

Mustafa continued to tear open another sachet of sugar. When there were no more, like a drug addict, he looked around for more of the same. Moina knew he took ten with every coffee.

Spotting a few spare under a cup at the next table, that had been left by a previous customer, the Cockroach lent over and grabbed them. Then he put them down beside the Turkish man's cup.

Carlos the Cockroach had some hidden charm and was sweet enough to smile at the girls as he did this: "You like working

in the hotel?" he asked Moina, as if teasing her.

Moina wanted to get more out of them about this trip down south. She did not answer the Cockroach, but smiled at the Turkish man and asked him: "What will you see when you visit London?"

Mustafa Pasha looked up nervously from his coffee cup: "Carlos I believe is going to take me to Stamford Bridge and to a place called Soho."

Moina knew that Chelsea football club played there at that ground and that Soho was where all foreign tourists went for the sex shows.

"But what about KTPP?" she wondered to herself. before enquiring: "Have you booked a hotel or Airbnb?"

Jacqueline lifted the champagne bottle out of its silver bucket and filled up her glass to the brim again: "Or will you just decide when you get there?" she added.

Then came the slip: “I am staying with my relations in London. I always stay with them when I go there.”

Moina remembered when Mustafa Pasha checked into the Grand Hotel a few months ago, she had asked him how his trip had been. “Did you come via London?” she asked.

“No, I arrived in Edinburgh. I have never been to London,” was his reply.

10

When Moina awoke, she felt lovely and cosy lying there in her single bed. The new duvet she had purchased the week before was a real treat indeed. She had got home late last night; it had been a good night out with her friend.

“Thank goodness it is Saturday and I have the day off today,” she yawned as she stretched herself.

As she looked out of her small bedroom window at the end of the room, Moina remembered her dream from the night before: “That’s right, I was in London, going to meet a friend for a coffee. I was walking towards a tube station. The streets were crowded with people, mainly dressed in black sombre clothes...”

Her conscious thoughts relayed the events back to herself again, as if to render them now part of the sentient world around her. Back came more fantastic images: “The sun was shining and although it was wintertime everything was lovely, bright and austere. There was a ceremony going on somewhere. Then all of a sudden, a man appeared in the crowd. He shouted something in a foreign

voice, then he was set upon by other men and dragged away."

It may have been November, but it looked a nice day outside her flat window on the south-side of Glasgow.

"What time is it?" Moina asked herself, before looking at the clock beside her bed. "That's fine, half past eight. I will get up in a minute and go into town and buy myself something nice to wear. After all, it is my day off. Why should I not spoil myself."

She could do what she liked now. This was the beauty off living on her own. She remembered when she was living with Graham, her old boyfriend, in their flat near to the city centre. He was a nice lad, but not for her. She found that out not long after he went away to work abroad. A routine test threw up gonorrhoea: "Graham was always on the go," she thought to herself laughing.

Within the hour, Moina was on a bus heading into Glasgow city centre; her flat just on the outskirts of town was handy for that.

It all went well. As usual the shops were busy for a Saturday, but she managed to buy what she wanted: perfume from the large department store, and a white blouse she would wear in the hotel next week.

Naturally, after doing the shopping, she wanted to relax: "Right time for a coffee in that lovely restaurant just off Mitchell Street," she told herself. "What is it called again, Zakaria. Yes, that's it. Let's head there…"

Moina noticed that this part of town was fairly busy today. She had read online before leaving home that there was an environmental conference on in Glasgow, over by the river Clyde. This area where Zakaria restaurant was situated had lots of restaurants and bars. It was fast becoming

the new haunt for tourists and day trippers.

It was reported on social media just last week, on all platforms, that Glasgow was the second worse city affected economically by the pandemic. She could believe that by the amount of shops in the city that had closed, or simply disappeared.

Just by looking around, it was plain to see that they were having to regenerate the city centre by turning empty department stores into flats.

When she got inside the restaurant, she was spotted right away by Khodr, the Lebanese waiter. He was a fine fellow.

"Ah Moina, my dear, I have your favourite table by the window waiting for you. All is good."

And guess who came into the Lebanese restaurant just before midday and asked for a single table over by the far end, near

to where the open planned kitchen area was situated.

Moina knew that Mustafa was not from the same country related to the restaurant. As she studied the menu, she confirmed to herself: “He would no doubt have heard about Zakaria, at the university and what type of food they serve here.”

Khodr the waiter could see that Moina was distracted: “You know we always keep this table for you, my dear,” he said in his lovely broken English accent. And as he looked round to see who she was looking at, he added: “It is good you have come back to see us again.”

“Thanks, Khodr.”

“Would you like your usual?”

“Yes, please Khodr - definitely need some caffeine after the shopping spree.”

“I know exactly how you like it. Coffee and carrot cake coming up for you,” and with that he was gone.

When she looked again over towards the open planned kitchen, Moina was still surprised to see Mustafa Pasha sitting there. She could see he was on his own staring into that other world he liked to visit. It was natural for him to gravitate here to this dinner; for it was the haunt of many foreign students, as well as local celebrities.

Today the restaurant was quite busy. Moina did not think her hotel guest saw her sitting there. So, from the table near by the window, she watched him closely. She noticed that Khodr did not greet the Turkish man in his usual friendly way. He was most reserved with him.

This was unusual for Khodr was the same to everyone he met. He was always happy to meet and greet whoever came into his place of work. You only had to meet Khodr once and he was your friend for life.

“Maybe he senses that Mustafa is not what he appears to be,” she wondered, as she put down the menu. “On the other hand, the customer client relationship is not Mustafa Pasha’s thing is it. That goes without saying.”

Moina knew that Mustafa had spotted her sitting there, but he did not let on. He just sat in the restaurant as if he was in the hotel. She watched him closely.

As was the way with him, Mustafa emptied many spoonful’s of sugar into his coffee cup in the usual way, and thereafter the ceremony started all over agin: twenty times anticlockwise then twenty times clockwise.

For something to do, Moina brought out her small iPad tablet, from her shoulder bag and started reading the book she had bought about *Eva Brawn*.

Time went by the way it does in restaurants and bars, and she soon found

herself daydreaming out of the large picture window onto Mitchell lane. Moina liked this area. She knew the building opposite used to be a newspaper office and that the tower above it was designed by the famous artist Rennie Mackintosh.

In fact, she was so relaxed now that she did not notice Mustafa Pasha leaving. He must have got up and left not long after he finished his coffee.

When it was time for Moina to leave, she did what she always did. She went over to the counter paid her bill, and thanked Khodr.

"Don't forget to come back and see us," he cried out as if she was immigrating to the other side of the world. "Your table is always here for you."

"Don't worry Khodr. I will be back to see you."

As she walked past him, she smiled; for she could see that he was making up a

fancy cocktail. She guessed it was for that fat middle aged woman, who had just arrived with her partner. He was tall, thin, bald, and smartly dressed in a dark suit. The fat woman heavily made up had on a revealing low cut dress.

"No doubt to show of her new plastic boobs," joked Moina to herself, as she looked over at her.

Just as she passed the table where the Turkish man had sat, Moina noticed under it there was a piece of paper lying there. It was folded in half. She guessed Mustafa must have dropped it. He was absent minded that way when he was outside - there was no doubt about that.

She casually bent down and picked it up. It was a letter of some sorts, she could see that much.

Even though the restaurant was busy no one seemed to notice her doing this. Moina's good intention told her to keep it

hidden in the palm of her hand. “I will read it on the bus on the way out of town,” she said, as she stuffed it into her pocket.

Indeed, half an hour later, sitting on the number 38 bus, she did just that. She could see that the folded A4 paper was a note to someone. It was in pre-cursive primary school handwriting:

Meet me before the ceremony outside the Red Onion pub: KTPP.

As if in a dream lying there in her single bed that night, Moina read the letter again and again over in her mind that she had picked up in the restaurant. Suddenly, out of nowhere the letters became words to her: Kill the Poppy People!

Startled she sat up and stared through the dark room towards the bedroom window. Moina always left the curtains

open at night for the light to come in to her room in the morning.

"That's it! This Sunday is Armistice Sunday. They are going on the night train tonight to London to launch some kind of attack at the Cenotaph on Sunday. I need to stop them.

"What time is that train they are on?" Moina got out of bed, switched on the bedside light and looked over at the clock. It was only 10:30pm. She knew the overnight train left at midnight from Glasgow Central station.

Moina knew she must get on that train and stop Mustafa Pasha and Carlos the Cockroach from carrying out this criminal act. She grabbed her purse from the table next to her bed, got dressed and flew out the door.

Once outside in the cold dark night, she got her bike out of the hut and peddled like mad towards the city centre.

As she reached the cross on the way into town, she kept telling herself: “If I keep going, I will catch the midnight train to London.”

Moina knew she could chain her bike up inside the station at the faraway platform, and get it on the way back in a few days time.

“They will not kill the Poppy People,” she kept saying to herself, as she peddled on.

11

"Hi Moina, where are you? What are you doing phoning me at midnight on a Friday night?"

"Listen Ted, I am on the sleeper train going to London, following two characters who are going to carry out an attack at the Cenotaph this Sunday."

“Of course you are Moina. I mean what else would you be doing on a Friday night?”

“No, seriously Ted, it is the truth. We need to meet up and stop them.”

“Moina it is such a long time since we saw each other. It was at the wedding, wasn’t it? It will be great to see you again down here in the old smoke.”

“Ted you have got to listen to me, while working in the Grand Hotel in my local area, I came across this strange chap called Mustafa Pasha. He has got in tow with a local revolutionary someone called Carlos the Cockroach. They have hatched this plot to explode a bomb on Sunday in London at the Cenotaph. Pasha is a Jihadi and Carlos, as his name suggests, is a anarchist. They are both dangerous. Are you still working in newspapers?”

“There’s still a few of us left,” chuckled Ted. “Moina, I remember when we

worked together in the local paper, the Mercury, way back then. You were always bringing me in outrageous stories like that. Great days they were - weren't they."

"Ted, I know that you have made the big time in London, but you must meet me at the station in the morning. The night train I am on gets in at 6:30 am."

"So, where are the terrorists?"

"Tucked up tight in the sleeping berths, no doubt," answered Moina sarcastically.

"Really."

"I am in the seated carriage at the front of the train; they are in a carriage behind me. Thankfully, they did not see me get on."

"What have you disguised yourself as?"

"A man," she joked.

"This I have got to see."

"Will you be there at the station in the morning, Ted?"

“Moina, I will be there first thing and we can have breakfast in the best restaurant in town.”

“Which is?”

“The only one that is open at that time of the morning: Café Nero inside St Pancras Station.”

“No expense spared. I will certainly be in need of some caffeine.”

“Now don’t engage with the terrorists until we talk about things, in the morning, Moina. Do you hear me?”

“Ok, Citizen Kane.”

“If there are no ticket inspectors at the gate, I will meet you on platform 1, and if not outside WH Smith on the concourse - see you then, Moina.”

As she settled down for the night, Moina was glad she had not bought a berth; for they were far too expensive. She was quite happy sitting there in the single seat in the second carriage of the night

train. The seat was large and comfortable. There was even a locker above her head for her valuables. If she had had any with her.

Moina had travelled this way before to London. It was a fine way to pass the time sitting there reading or watching a film on the computer. The carriage right at the front of the train was warm, quiet and peaceful. Moina, although full of nervous energy, even managed to doze off.

In the morning, she awoke just as they were passing a huge football ground. The train was going quite slow now. When Moina looked out and saw that it was the national stadium for England, she knew the train would soon be arriving at Euston station.

She got her things quickly together, went to the toilet, tidied herself up, and not long after this the night train did

indeed pull into platform 1, and she alighted it.

As she stepped onto the platform, the chill of the morning air greeted her and immediately brought a fresh wave of excitement over her. Moina wondered about the people still in their berths. She knew they could lie in their beds for an extra hour. This was part of the deal that came with the expensive ticket.

Having slept in a berth before, she knew they also got served breakfast in bed: usually a muffin and something to drink.

"Moina."

She heard the voice all right of her old friend Ted, but she could not see him. The platform was empty and there was no one to be seen anywhere in the station.

The clock at the end of the platform told her that the train had indeed arrived on time. It was half past six in the morning. Just then, two railway men

appeared at the far end of the platform to maintain the engine of the night train.

Even though she had been here many times before, the station looked unreal and unfamiliar to her. One or two commuters like Moina, who had arrived in the capital on the night train, walked past her.

Normally, at Euston you had to make you way through crowds of people to get to your destination. It was eerily quiet. Then another two passengers came onto the platform from the sleeping berths. One was a businessman and the other was an elderly lady, with a large suitcase, who looked like she was heading abroad.

"Thankfully, no sign of Mustafa Pasha and the Cockroach," she reassured herself.

"Did you sleep well?" asked Ted, as he emerged from behind a huge green pillar, "It is great to see you again, Moina."

Moina had not seen Ted since the wedding nearly two years ago now - a lot had happened since then.

He looked well she thought, as she rushed into his arms and kissed him. Moina guessed by the way he looked at her that he was living with someone.

"So, journalists these days hide behind railway pillars. Is that what they do for a living?" she joked, as he released her.

After another kiss duly followed, they walked along the concourse together like old friends: "Did you have a good trip Moina?"

"You never get to sleep, but it is comfortable enough."

"I take it the terrorists are still sleeping in their beds."

Moina did not answer him, she just smiled: "Ted, I will tell you all about it later when we get to my hotel."

"Right let's get you organised."

“Have you got a car?”

“Are you kidding - this is London. I only bring the old jalopy out when I am working. Have you seen the price of a gallon of petrol these days?”

As soon as they exited the train station, Ted bellowed out in a loud clear Glasgow accent: “Taxi!”

Being so early in the morning a driver roused across the road. As if in slow motion his vehicle moved from the kerb, and made its way over to pick them up at the official taxi rank, where they were now standing.

“He has obviously forgot about buying me a coffee at St Pancras,” thought Moina, as they got inside.

Half an hour later just off White Horse Street, London, in a small hotel down at reception Moina and Ted sat opposite each other at the bar. They did this to give the manager time to sort out her details.

He was a decent fellow, from of all places Cairo. The man was so eager to make a good impression that in the short space of time of meeting them, he told them his life story. It was quite a story too. He had been here since the late seventies. It was obvious the way he acted he had become, as the saying goes, more English than the English.

Even though the bar was not open yet, he brought them coffee from the dining room, self-service area, along with biscuits and cakes. He was an excellent host.

"My name is Aharon," he said as he fussed over them.

His English was good, but he still had a light trace of a foreign accent through it, as if he were really a character in an Agatha Christie novel: "The compliments of the house madam. You can grab a coffee in there any time you wish," he purred, "We always like to keep our guests

happy here at the hotel. I will now sort out your details for you."

"You do that my good fellow," said Ted when he was gone.

Moina knew what Ted was like and she just ignored him. She looked out the window as she sipped her coffee and tried to relax. It was still early in the morning. The London streets outside the hotel were as silent as the grave. Though those ghostly morning images from wherever made her excited, for what awaited her in the capital, she could not fathom out.

Ted looked at the piece of paper in Mona's hand that she had taken out of her pocket. Presently, she handed it over to him: "You see they have come to London to plant a bomb at the Cenotaph tomorrow morning - read that," she said pointing it at him.

The other letter she had found in Mustafa's hotel room she had

photographed on her phone. This was after Betsy had knocked over the bag of sugar. To her both notes were incriminating documents. She also pointed this missive at him from the picture in her device.

Ted read them both, then asked the obvious question: "Who and what are the KTPP, when they are at home?"

Moina bent forward and withdrew the mobile phone that had the document in it.

"Is it an organisation?"

"No, it is a reference to what they are going to do."

"Which is?"

"Kill the Poppy People."

"You mean they are going to explode a bomb at the Cenotaph on Sunday."

"That's what I have been telling you."

Even though he laughed, for the first time Ted seemed to sober up. Moina

noticed this and made mention of another fact she had in her possession: “They are staying at the Victoria Hotel, near Liverpool Street station? I am sure they will plant the bomb tonight, being Saturday, and detonate it tomorrow at the parade.”

Looking again at the piece of paper Moina had left down on the table, Ted said: “You think where it says when the march begins press the button, this refers to the march past.”

“I am sure of it.”

“Are you sure they are staying at the Victoria Hotel.”

“Yes, I picked this up from a telephone call made to Mustafa’s room.”

“Ok, Moina seems like good fun to me. Let’s see if we can stop the plot to Kill the Poppy People. You never know I may have a good story for the paper on Monday and the online one before that.”

“Always the professional man,” Moina mocked him.

“If I am right, they will have to plant the bomb tonight when it is dark,” murmured Ted, as he folded his hands together and put them under his chin.

“As you know, I am an investigating journalist now with the Daily Globe. I have learnt a lot since joining them. Listen, I will tell you what we should do. You try and catch a few hour’s rest, and I will pick you up at midday, and we will get going on the KTTP plot.”

Moina did just that. She had a quick shower, then a catnap on top of the bed. It was natural she could not fall asleep; for she was too excited. Her mind went into a mesmeric state: catching terrorists and confronting unknown visitors in the city of London.

A few hours later, she was ready to meet her friend Ted the reporter outside

the hotel. It was a nice afternoon; the sun was shining, though it was bitterly cold.

As she stood there, Moina looked for her friend. She could not see him. Suddenly, instructions came from a familiar voice from across the road. She noticed a smart MG sports car sitting there in front of the Jeweller's shop: "Moina over here," came the repeated cry from that direction.

London by this time was jam-packed with shoppers and travellers. "More like it," she thought, as she made her way across the busy road.

What a change it was from a few hours ago when she had first arrived. It was so busy now that she had difficulty in getting across the road to join him.

Even though there was a war going on in the Ukraine, and the pandemic was still raging on, the capital was thriving. Like all capital cities it seemed to absorb the era it

was living in. Whatever was ongoing out there in the world the people who lived here in London seemed to find a way round it.

Moina when she got into the sports car did not say anything, but she did wonder if Ted had bought the MG, or if he had borrowed it from a friend for the day.

"I will put the meter on now," said Ted as soon as she got inside. Then he told her where they were going: "Piccadilly Circus."

"Why are we going there?" she asked him, as she got comfortable in her seat.

"I want you to meet a friend of mine, a woman called Esmeralda."

Moina smiled at him, pulled her seatbelt across her body and fastened it. As always she looked out of the car window after she duly rolled it down: "How can you drive in this city Ted?" she quipped, "I

mean look at all those cars. The road is chock-a-block."

Moina put her protective mask on; for she felt it would not only protect her from the virus that was still on the go, but the pollution too from buses and cars that were now everywhere around her. She knew that it also hid her appearance just in case she was spotted in the capital by her hotel guest, Mustafa Pasha and his friend Carlos the Cockroach. They were certainly here in London somewhere, there was no doubt about that.

When they arrived at Piccadilly Circus, Ted parked across the road, in a side street, switched the engine off, pulled out the key and cried. "Right, let's go Moina! I know this little café down here. This is where I would like you to meet my friend, the makeup artist called Esmeralda."

Ted was always one to forget things and instead of getting out of the car, he bent

over her and opened the little glove compartment. Then the journalist informed his freind: “Today, Esmeralda is going to make you up so that no-one will recognise you as we go about the capital investigating this KTTP case.

Moina looked at him as if he had spoken to her in a foreign language: “Really.”

“Yes, this happens all the time in London now: incognito is the buzz word these days.”

Moina could not fathom out what he was on about. “Sounds interesting,” she said sarcastically.

Once outside on the street Moina looked over at Piccadilly Circus and sighed. “I know you think this is crazy Ted, but I tell you when I came across them in my hotel, I knew they were up to something.”

“I am firmly on-board Moina,” Ted reassured her, as he finally got out of the car and closed the door. “We must be at all times professional and on our guard.”

Ted was in a good mood now, he started talking to her about his career. He was certainly happy here in the city of London working as an investigative journalist. She could tell that just looking at him. After they had crossed the road they walked down what looked like an alley called Air Street, and there they stopped outside the little café bar called Ziggy’s.

By this time, Moina had stopped listening to him. She openly wondered: “Whoever comes down here. This is a back alley we are in?”

Ted could see Ziggy’s was quiet at the moment and said as much: “We are in luck. Grab that table there; I will go inside and get the drinks. This is the best place in

London, you know, for coffee. What do you want? I am going to have a large expresso," he said before she had a chance to answer him, "Quick, sit there before someone grabs it."

When she was away from work, Moina always let her hair down. Before sitting down at the only table outside the café bar, she alerted her friend about this: "Please make mine a glass of white wine, Ted."

"Then that is what it will be, my dear."

Moina watched him as he marched inside. Once there she heard him say to someone: "Could I have my usual and a glass of your best white wine, please."

It was obvious this was one of Ted's hidey-holes in London. Sitting outside, Moina looked back inside the café through the large window, but could not see that much due to the fact the glass was tainted.

Ziggy's, the small cafe bar was certainly hidden away, and was different from the

ones on the high street. As she sat there, Moina naturally wondered who frequented this mysterious area not far from Piccadilly Circus.

"Ted the press man knows all the places to go in London, all right," she said out loud to herself, as if to an imaginary friend sitting beside her. Then she then did what she always did when sitting alone, she checked her mobile phone, "Well, no missed calls, prompts or alerts. I can relax."

Even from halfway down this hidden lane, Moina could still see it was a lovely day and being a Saturday the London streets at the top end near the Circus were busy with non-stop traffic. Yet, sitting here she felt she was somewhere else. It was as if she was in another city, in another time zone. Moina smiled at this thought and started to daydream.

After all, the possibility to be famous wherever you went in the capital was what London was all about. Was it not? Even in an obscure lane far from the famous sights Moina felt different - a hidden star.

Air Street certainly had a rough sort of charm to it, she could see that much from those who came down it. They were interesting characters, businessmen as well as chic drifters. In a way it took her back to what she imagined old London to be like, when she first went there with the school as a young pupil: mysterious, hidden, and always dangerous.

Presently, her friend Ted the reporter came back outside and sat down opposite her. Moina wasted no time in telling him more about the adventure she was on: “Listen Ted, we need to alert the authorities about Mustafa Pasha and Carlos the Cockroach. They are going to

plant a bomb at the Cenotaph on Sunday. We need to get them arrested."

"We can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You need evidence."

"Well, here it is."

Moina took the letter out of her pocket again: the paper again she found in the restaurant. Presently, she pushed it to him over the little metal table where they now sat together.

Ted took it up and smiled to himself: "You can make what you want of KTPP."

"What do you mean? They are going to explode a bomb at the Cenotaph tomorrow, and you are making it out to be a joke."

"KTPP could mean anything: Kinky Types Please Pullover. The police would just laugh at you."

"I heard them talking about it in the hotel and I listened into Mustafa's calls at

reception. A foreign man always called him every Monday night at 8:30 pm. His name was Aziz."

"You did, did you."

"Don't try and make a fool of me. They are staying over there in the Victoria Hotel and we should be watching them."

"All in good time. First let's have a drink here in Ziggy's. The scoop of the decade will have to wait until we have had our lunchtime drinks."

"Ted, I am not interested in the press coverage. We need to stop them."

"Ah, here comes the coffee and the white wine," said Ted standing up to greet the waitress.

"Your coffee sir, and a white wine for the lady."

"Thank you Maria Contessa."

Moina could see she knew all about Ted, the roving reporter, and that a large tip was no doubt on the way for her.

Just then a thin red haired smartly dressed fashionable woman appeared and stopped at their table. Moina had noticed her walking down the lane. She stood out not only by the way she was dressed, but she walked with purpose as if she was going to meet a film crew or television reporter.

"Ah Esmeralda, this is the famous makeup artist, I was telling you about." exclaimed Ted.

In a hurry, he put his hand in his trouser pocket brought out a note with the face of the queen on it, then he dismissed the waitress: "That's fine Maria Contessa, just keep the change."

"Hello my dears, it is always a pleasure to have coffee at Ziggy's with my favourite London reporter: Mr Ted."

Ted, as is the way with show business people hugged Esmeralda with great affection. His professional training then

kicked in thereafter, and he introduced his Scottish friend to her in his usual sober tone: “This is my dear friend Moina all the way from sunny Glasgow.” Then he got straight to the point: “Esmeralda, I want you to change Moina’s appearance.”

“What!” exclaimed Moina, nearly chocking on her wine.

“As we try to uncover the mystery of the KTPP, we don’t want the two miscreants from Glasgow recognising you - now do we.”

“What do you mean change my appearance?” exclaimed Moina, open mouthed.

Esmeralda studied her closely, and in a high sweet voice made an immediate comment: “Yes, I can do that. Your friends from Glasgow will not know who you are after I am finished with you.”

Still standing up, outside the café bar, Ted added: “And I am sure Moina, you

can alter your voice accordingly to suit the character you are playing."

Moina could not get her head round what they were on about. Ted had obviously a plan in mind, and Moina to her credit in good faith went along with the escapade. After all, she was defending her country. It was all rather weird, as if it were part of some storyboard for a film or play, filmed down a strange lane not far from Piccadilly Circus.

In good spirits she agreed with the crazy idea, and went with Esmeralda to the ladies room inside Ziggy's the little café bar: "To be changed," as the makeup artist had put it.

As they walked together towards the entrance of the small café bar, Moina was surprised when the makeup artist turned to her and said in a cunning foreign tone: "I have my studio here in the back shop of

the café. It is an international secret. Please do not tell anyone."

Ten minutes later out they came from the ladies' room, Moina looking like a blonde bimbo, her auburn hair completely covered now by a lovely long blonde wig, eyes all done up and lips painted with a super lustrous lipstick like fire and ice.

Ted taking in this rapturous image unconsciously stood up, and as he laughed, he confirmed: "Moina your mother would walk by you."

12

It was over by Liverpool Street train station, the hotel Mustafa Pasha and the Cockroach were staying at. The building was situated right on the corner of the street. It was a small unassuming place. The kind of hotel no doubt where a

diplomat or financier would likely stay to avoid unwanted attention.

Ted the reporter knew the city of London quite well. However, this hotel he did not know: “Unobtrusive area, is it not?” he muttered, as he rolled down the window of his MG car: “Let’s get out the car Moina, and get a better look at it.”

And once again, Moina was on the street standing waiting for him. Ted the reporter from the Globe press agency she knew was never in a rush. He was a real fidget. Even this time she could see he was checking something on the dashboard before getting out of the car.

“So, what should we do now?” she asked, when he finally joined her on the pavement.

After he had looked over at the old-fashioned facade of the hotel, he smiled at her: “You tell me.”

“Should we go inside?” she proposed. “We can say we are looking for a room for the night.”

“No, I think it is another coffee over there,” Ted answered diplomatically: “Let’s avoid the corporate coffee outlet this time and head for that one there. Yes, Bar Vagliaino looks interesting.”

As they passed the bakers shop en route to the French Café, Ted offered his thoughts once more to her as to what they should do next: “When the gruesome twosome appear we will tail them and see where they end up.”

So, it was another expresso for the city reporter, and this time an Americano coffee for Moina the Poppy Lady. After ordering at the counter inside Bar Vagliaino, they went and sat over by the window, and from there kept watch across the road for the two jihadis to come out of their hotel.

As Moina and Ted sat there, they chatted about old times when they used to work together at the Mercury newspaper office. Then after that they went on to the present day about what old friends at school were up to now.

"Did you hear Tim Hatter has just released his second novel called: *Ok for you*. Can you believe that?"

"Everyone is writing these days," responded Ted, dismissing the venture. "Tim was a dumbo at school, was he not?"

"Why can't dumbos not write good novels?"

Ted knew how clever Moina could be when it came to protecting others. As he stirred his expresso coffee, he quickly returned to a neutral topic: "Work at the Grand Hotel, going well."

"Oh, I love it Ted. You know, I meet all sorts of interesting people there."

“Yes, I can see that, notably Mustafa Pasha and Carlos the Cockroach to name but two.”

Just as they were beginning to enjoy themselves, the aforementioned came out of their hotel.

Ted, as soon as he set eyes on them, said: “Ah ha! The two men from the KTPP have finally surfaced. I must say I have not set eyes on any of them before.”

Moina was quite excited at seeing them too, and she watched them walk from the entrance of the hotel onto the street: “No, you have been away for two years, Ted, but that is them all right.”

“Right Moina, it looks as if they are looking for a taxi. You follow them - hail a taxi from the street. I will be behind you in the MG. They will never recognise you, he said, as he turned round and smiled at her. “Take your time, and keep me updated on the phone. I will stay close by.”

So, through the London streets Moina, in a black cab, followed Mustafa Pasha and Carlos the Cockroach until their taxi came to a stop.

The Turkish man got out, paid the cabbie from the London street. Then they both walked on along together.

By this time in the afternoon the city was really busy, and Ted had a job parking nearby. Moina was quick to alight her cab and follow them on foot.

She could hear Ted was starting to get a bit anxious on the phone. The driver in front of him was getting on his nerves: "Come on, hurry up!" he kept saying down the phone.

Moina could tell there was obviously some driver in his way and stopped speaking to him. Mercifully, Ted managed to get the car parked just off Jerome Street. It was a small area he found there. No one seemed to go down this street

except for the Telecom workers who had a big office there.

Moina quickly made up a plan: “You stay in the car, Ted, and I will follow them on foot.”

Ted was more than happy to do that, and he relaxed and switched the engine off. As Moina walked behind Mustafa and Carlos, she kept him updated where she was and what they were up to.

“They are heading to the subway station.”

“Which one is it?”

“How would I know; I am not from here.”

“What does the street name say?”

“I am walking along Commercial Street.”

“The station they are heading towards, what is the name of it?”

“Aldgate East.”

“Moina if you are right about what Mustafa and the Cockroach are up to, they are heading for Westminster.”

“I will drive over now and meet you there at the Cenotaph.”

“Of course, they are going to plant the bomb there today and set it off tomorrow,” said Moina out of breath, as she hurried along behind the jihadis.

“Don’t do anything silly now, Moina. Stay well out of their way. I will meet you when you come out of the tube station.”

On first glance Aldgate East tube station to Moina looked like it was part of an office block, but it was definitely a train station; for she could see people going down to commute to other places.

Moina watched Mustafa and the Cockroach do just that. At the same time as holding on to the blue rail, she kept an eye on them: “I would wear my high heels

for this sort of work," she mocked herself, as she negotiated the stairs.

Moina knew from reading books that the area of Aldgate was associated with Jack the Ripper, and it was this that kept her amused as she headed underground: "Well, I better keep going, don't want to bump into any of his friends."

At the bottom of the stairs, she smiled at an African man who had caught her eye. He was going up on the escalator: "You would not believe this if I told you," she said carrying on an imaginary conversation with herself.

When the tube arrived, Moina stood just inside the door, and from there through the adjoining carriage she kept an eye on her hotel guest and his sidekick.

The journey from Aldgate East to Westminster took about twenty minutes. When they got off at Westminster, she

followed Mustafa and the Cockroach up the stairs.

Moina looked around her, but there was no sign of Ted the Globe trotting reporter, to be seen. When she got up onto the street, like a spook who had just been assigned to her first case, she followed the two suspects all the way along the road and soon found herself on Parliament Street. It was busy there too. People were coming and going on both sides of the road.

Moina wondered if Ted had gone on ahead and had headed up to the Cenotaph to meet her there. She could not call him; for his phone was for some reason unavailable

Mustafa and the Cockroach walked past the Cenotaph, but they stopped outside the Red Onion pub. There they both stood like tourists and looked around as if wondering what to do next. She

noticed however unlike tourists they did not go inside the bar for a drink.

Just as she was approaching the pub she saw Ted's MG car, but she could see he was struggling to find a parking slot across the road. He did not see her.

Moina nodded towards the pub as if to say: "I am going in here to keep an eye on our friends out there on the street," but it was in vain.

Just as she passed the two suspects, she had been following, she overheard Mustafa whisper to the Cockroach: "My friend, let us wait here for a few moments."

And as they stood outside the Red Onion pub, Moina walked inside. Moina confident in her disguise brushed past the two of them, and walked straight up to the bar.

Monia like a detective in the movies acted uninterested about her surroundings, and from inside the bar she kept an eye on

the two of them. She could see they were absorbed in something, but what were they saying, she could not make out?

As she stood at the bar waiting to be served, Moina looked back outside as if hypnotised by the excitement of the capital streets.

She noticed Mustafa took out a packet of cigarettes. However, he did not take one for whatever reason. He just tossed the packet into the air, and then moments later they both walked away.

"You work for the government, mon chéri?" said the foreign voice of the barman, as he grinned at her.

The good looking young man with a French accent was holding a pint tumbler that he had just cleaned. He kept smiling at her as if he knew what she was up to.

Moina felt like someone stuck inside a cinema somewhere watching a weird movie. To keep him happy, she played her

part: “Who me, darling. No, I am in the arts.”

“British,” he asked carrying on the census?”

“Just visiting for the day and have come in for a cuppa.”

“I will get that for you,” he said and away he went over to the machine at the other end of the bar.

Just at that moment in came Ted, out of breath: “I see you friends are heading back into town.”

“How did you know I was in here?”

“Moina come on, the nearest pub.”
Moina laughed, then wondered: “What shall we do now that they have gone? Shall we alert the authorities about them. I mean they both are acting suspicious. Are they not?”

“No, we can’t do that. They have done nothing wrong; they are tourists just like others out there wandering around.”

When they got back to the hotel around 4pm. Moina thought she had better head up to her room and freshen up. Ted looked at her as they stood together at the reception desk. He did not want to go back to the office today, and said as much.

Instead, he made his way to the bar and sat down there and bought himself a nice cold beer: "Time to relax."

As the waiter from Cairo poured out the bottle of beer into a tall thin glass for him, he spoke to his customer in that lovely almost perfect English accent of his: "The city, busy today, sir."

Ted just nodded and replied: "Somewhat, Aharon."

Thereafter taking a drink, Ted pondered the morning adventure: "Well, it has been a funny old day, I must say."

The manager of the hotel from Cairo seeing the woman with the blonde wig,

standing beside him asked: “Would the lady like anything?”

Moina smiled and as she did so she took off the wig and put it on the counter beside her. This indeed made him laugh. He had no doubt met actresses before, but was surprised by the insouciant manner of this one: Moina the Poppy Lady.

Moina thought she would stay at the bar for a few moments longer with Ted before going up to her room to freshen up. She stared at her friend, then she said to the manager: “No, just the key for the room please.”

He may have indeed been a nice manager. However, before he left to get her the key, seeing him not wearing a poppy Moina took him to task. “Now sir, I see on the reception counter over there you are selling poppies, but you are not wearing one. Can I invite you to put

something in the tin, and a Poppy in your lapel."

The man from Cairo was mortified and being a good fellow immediately took from his wallet a note, and went straight over to the tin beside the poppies and unceremoniously stuffed the note in the can. Thereafter, he proudly pinned a poppy to his black suit jacket.

Moments later, just like a naughty schoolboy, the manager turned round and went back over to his guests and presented himself to Moina the Poppy Lady. "I ask you to forgive me please; for the indiscretion."

After doing that he seemed to be in a better mood now than before - if that was possible. Thinking it great fun the man from Cairo asked a pertinent question: "Are you really an actress?"

"Yes, and hopefully we can finish the movie I am filming here in London at the

moment about titled Poppy People, and capture the two jihadis we are after."

The manager could see Ted was enjoying his beer and smiled at him, then he went back to the reception area and came back with room key number 12 for his guest. He gently waved it in the air, saying: "Happy to assist the Poppy Lady in anything else she wishes."

Not far away at the bar, Ted nodded to himself as he heard him say this: "You are right there my friend about Moina being a actress," and smiled at him.

Half an hour later Moina came down from her room and as soon as she entered the hotel reception area she could see Ted was still over at the bar. It was plain to see he was even more relaxed now.

The tall man from Cairo came over and fussed over Moina again: "Do you wish a drink madam."

“Yes Aharon, Can I have a G and T, please.”

“Are you joining your friend over at the bar.”

“Yes, over there thanks,” she said and waved over at Ted.

“Ah, you have changed back into your old self,” observed Ted looking round to greet her.

Moina relaxed by sitting beside him at the bar and got straight to the point: “You know they are up to something, don’t you? And they are going to try and pull it off tomorrow at the ceremony.”

“They won’t get anywhere near the parade Moina - there will be police everywhere.”

“I know, but they are up to something. I can feel it. I have got good senses you know Ted.”

“Listen Moina, I made a phone call and I am pleased to tell you that we have

got two press tickets for the parade tomorrow. One for you and one for me. Let's meet here in the morning at nine o'clock, and we will join the parade. It is a great occasion, you know. From there we can keep an eye on things."

"Is it not only for military and service people?"

"No, there are a lot of civvies involved now. I have contacts with one of the travel agents who do battlefield tours in France. They are always asking us to put stories in our paper about their pilgrimage tours, when they want to take people abroad to visit the battlefields."

"Sounds good; I would like that, Ted."

"Right, so tomorrow we will make our way along with the ex-members. I suggest you wear your blonde wig again. I am sure it will go down well with the veterans."

“Well, I suppose, I can do that for them, and of course just in case Mustafa Pasha and Carlos the Cockroach turn up.”

“Have you got a dark coat with you Moina?”

“Yes, my raincoat is dark.”

“Splendid, it can get quite cold before the parade goes off. I tell you Moina marching with the veterans you will never forget it. The memory will stay with you forever.”

13

So as arranged, the next day they met at Moina's hotel and headed for Green Park Station. From there they walked towards Horse Guards parade. Ted met his contact there, and outside on the green, over a long table, the military man as promised gave him two press passes for the parade.

They were then escorted to the section of the parade they had to join. It seemed like a blink of an eye and in no time at all they were standing outside Downing Street.

The group they joined had their own marshal and, when the steward brought them forward, the marshal welcomed both of them like old friends.

"Shouldn't be too long and we will be off," he said with a lovely smile.

As Moina looked over towards the PM's house, she heard an elderly man beside her say to someone: "Now remember hats off when you go by the Cenotaph, after the two minutes silence is over."

Ted had his bunnet on, but for some reason up until that moment Moina had not really took much notice of it.

"It's a pretty bland old looking thing anyway," she thought as she stared up at it

However, he did have a smart dark raincoat that he had no doubt bought for the oncoming winter and to his credit he looked the part for the parade.

With their big white badges pinned to their coats the two of them stood in line and waited for the word to march off.

When the bell told for the beginning of the two-minute silence Moina stood like everyone else in complete silence and paid tribute to those who had gave their lives in combat and in civilian life.

In the silence a great feeling came over Moina of what people had done for their country. She could not understand, or even comprehend it in her thoughts. Moina searched the silence for a reason for wars between nations and all that had gone before, what had been fought for and what had been lost, yet it all seemed to be represented by unseen spirits in the air somewhere.

In a state of being neither here nor there, she looked up at the building where the Monarch was standing in the balcony looking down on proceedings. The queen, the defender of the faith, was old now, but still made an appearance showing that she was carrying out her duties.

After the silence was over the politicians came out from a building on her left-hand side and started to lay their wreaths. Then they were off down the road to the marching tune *It's a long way to Tipperary*, played by the band in front of them, towards the solemn Cenotaph edifice.

It was a wonderful march. Moina had not been in a parade since she had been in the Brownies at church. What an awesome feeling it was to be part of such a ceremony. The faces in the crowd seemed to her to be real and genuine, not like faces in crowds that gather in the city every day,

who go shopping or commute to work where they look lost and are all strangers.

The faces that lined the route of this parade she could see paid tribute to the dead by looking at the marchers going past them. The relationship was genuine and respectful. The weather may have been cold, but the sun was beautiful just like in that dream she had.

As they were going past the Cenotaph, Moina stared at the edifice. She had seen it many times before on the tv. This time it was for real. It was a wonderful occasion, and she was thrilled to be part of it.

She was so happy she held Ted's hand as they marched passed. For good measure before they got there she nudged him in the ribs to remind him to take his bunnet off.

She was so thrilled that she even forgot about the wild adventure she was on

following her hotel guest Mustafa Pasha and his friend Carlos the Cockroach.

However, the high she was feeling at that moment was followed by an absolute low; for as they passed the Red Onion pub, she suddenly remembered Mustafa Pasha throwing a cigarette packet up into the air.

"It never came down."

"What never came down," laughed Ted.

"The cigarette packet!"

Moina looked over at the hanging baskets. "The device must be in the plant pot above the pub."

Without thinking another thought, Moina broke ranks and raced over to the pub, and once there got up on a table and looked inside the old hanging pot there.

And there it was: a fag packet with a small timing device inside it, ready to set

off a bomb somewhere in the local area of Westminster, London.

She grabbed it and run up the side street on the left-hand side of the pub. The street was quiet, just off from where the parade was taking place. Round the corner there was some kind of work going on refurbishing the large building on the right-hand side.

Moina with the device in her hand found a large drum there that was full of water. Workmen had obviously been working here. She dropped the cigarette packet bomb inside the large container full of water, sand and dirt, and fled the scene.

As soon as she got back onto the street where the parade was still going passed she met Ted. He came running up to her.

"What are you up to Moina?" he laughed.

Moina related what had happened to her friend Ted, then she told him: "I will

always support the Poppy People against those who wish to do our country ill. We all must always do our bit."

Poppy People music album available from:

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